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The Cuban Invasion, One Year Later

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This week of April 15-21 marks the first anniversary of the ill-fated Cuban invasion incident which, even after a year, still remains a subject of bitter bureaucratic and partisan dispute. Writing in the "New York Times" on April 14, 1961, just prior to the landing attempt, James Reston observed: "The last time we intervened in a massive way in Cuba, President McKinley claimed to have the benefit of 'divine guidance' (which, it's true, wasn't very good), Teddy Roosevelt thought it would be 'good for the Navy,' and Secretary of State Hay thought it was a 'splendid little war.'"

JFK's Poll

Ten days before our ill-fated intervention on April 4, 1961, President Kennedy personally polled the members of his National Security Council on the operation at a secret briefing by Mr. Richard M. Bissell, the C.I.A. Deputy who had master-minded the U-2 operation.

All present, except Senator Fulbright, the only Congressman on hand, favored it, and Adlai Stevenson, the State Department's

ordinator for Latin American Affairs, exclaimed "Let her rip," explaining that inevitably the U.S. would have to face up to a "confrontation with Communism" in this hemisphere and the sooner the better.

The moment of truth, the landing attempt by about 1,500 Cuban refugees, lasted roughly 72 hours. Some of the 1,200 prisoners taken have only recently, a year later, bled back, after the payment of an exorbitant ransom. President Kennedy accepted "full responsibility" (as did Secretary of Defense McNamara for the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and it was only later that the fiasco was a sobering episode with useful lessons for all.

Thanks to official leaks, such as an article in "The Saturday Evening Post" by Stewart Alsop and another C.I.A.-inspired article by Charles Murphy in "Fortune" magazine, the historical myth has developed that the President and State Department caused "the fatal disaster" of the whole plan, that it was "the doubts of Mr. Fulbright and others" that led to its failure.

with was so truncated as to guarantee its failure."

Decisions

Like so many other contemporary historical myths, this is largely false. Let us look closely at the crucial decisions. At the April 4th and 5th meetings, the President made it perfectly clear that there would be no direct intervention by U.S. forces — including jet aircraft on the Carrier "Boxer" standing nearby. Any air strikes (such as the one on D-Day minus two, which actually destroyed half of Castro's T-33 jet training planes) would have to be under "cover," i. e., by planes with Cuban air force markings.

The cover story was that the two planes which landed in Florida after the airstrike were flown by Cuban defectors, the idea being that the refugees could ask "How could we bomb the airfields when we don't have any planes?" This chancy fiction is reminiscent of the defense of an illiterate paragon charged with distributing pornographic literature in "Boys and Girls": "You know how could this be possible when I don't even have a kindergarten?"

The cover story was speedily exposed, but only after U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Adlai Stevenson had sworn before the Assembly that the planes were Castro's. After this prelude to the coming debacle, the second airstrike was cancelled. But even then, the A-1 did not call off the landing. The crucial concerns were convinced that, in case of need, "The imperative military logic" of the situation would force a policy reversal from the President and overwhelming jet airpower would be brought in by the U.S. Carrier "Boxer" would be brought into play at the crucial moment.

For the reason, C.I.A. felt it could not risk the Cuban invasion without the possibility of which could have started a series of disturbances that would coincide with the landing. The same reasoning accounts for the fact that instead of planning two or three simultaneous landings as seems to divide Castro's forces (and his remaining strategy was adopted).

Even in this light, what on the surface appears to be an incredible military blunder of which even a school boy would be incapable becomes a perfectly credible mistake in political judgment. It is an error in assessing the character and determination of the President to stand fast on the original decision — to which all were a party. (The same reasoning explains why C. I. A. failed adequately to purge Batista supporters in the landing party (in direct defiance of a Presidential order) and felt that it could dispense with popular uprisings against Castro.

Impossible

Thus in the first weeks of April 1961, President Kennedy and the State Department attempted to carry out as a covert operation an undertaking which could not possibly have achieved its political objective (the overthrow of Castro and his replacement by a regime permanently acceptable to the Cuban people) even had the landing attempt succeeded.

On the other hand, in spite of a national policy decision to the contrary, C.I.A. and the military actions concerned continued to implement a military plan the success of which hinged on direct intervention, a plan which even had it succeeded militarily would not have secured the political objective sought after. National objectives cannot be reached by coordinating divided bureaucratic machines on different tracks with a breakdown of effective communications between them — especially when neither track leads to the desired objective.